

Sociology Today

Take all these tape recordings I make with fish. If I did it with people it would take ten times as long! First I'd have to get their consent and the permission of the top brass, then I'd have to work out what they really mean when they talk to each other, apart from what they say they mean. And then they'd only disagree with me! They'd argue with my findings! They'd say that wasn't what they meant at all! That I had it all wrong! They'd argue back! It's all too much! So I went into fish instead.

—Rosaleen Love, *Where Are They?*

1.1 The Diversity of Sociological Method

Sociology is characterized by a diversity of theories and methods. Kuhn's notion of a paradigm¹ has been used recently to analyze the nature of this diversity. The concept of a paradigm was developed by Kuhn as a part of his explanation for the progress of science. Sciences, according to Kuhn, develop through a number of stages. Before a scientific discipline is properly established, it is characterized by a number of schools with rival paradigms. Paradigms include the general theoretical assumptions, specific laws and theories, and the methods and techniques adopted by the scientific community. Paradigms set standards for legitimate work and coordinate and direct problem-solving activities. Normal science is characterized by a single paradigm, that is, by considerable consensus over theories and problems, methods and techniques. This facilitates efficient communication and decision making within the scientific community, and allows the accumulation of knowledge. Difficulties within the paradigm, for example, large numbers of unsolved problems, may lead to a crisis, which in turn may lead to a scientific revolution. This will be followed by a new period of normal science. The existence or otherwise of a single scientific paradigm marks the distinction between science and non-science for Kuhn, and it is on this basis that he labels sociology pre-scientific.

The lack of consensus in sociology was demonstrated by Lodahl and Gordon in a study of graduate schools in the United States, in which they compared the disciplines of physics, chemistry, sociology, and political science

according to the level of agreement or conflict among university staff over theories, methods, and findings. Their study tested such features as the level of agreement over the content of survey courses and the ease of communications and decision making. They found that physics consistently ranked highest on consensus, whereas political science and sociology ranked lowest.²

While some, like Kuhn, argue that the multiplicity of theories and methods in sociology indicates its pre-scientific nature, and attribute its supposed lack of progress vis-a-vis the natural sciences to its lack of a paradigm, others argue that the diversity of theories and methods is itself paradigmatic for sociology, and is a result of the nature of its subject matter. From such a viewpoint, the diversity of theories and methods is itself not a problem for sociology. What is problematic is the apparently contradictory nature of the various assumptions underlying sociological methodology and theory. This, together with the existence of contradictory truth-claims, is a problem for all who believe that sociology should provide reliable knowledge of the social world.

These issues lie very close to the surface in sociology, and no student of sociology can remain unaware of them for long. Indeed, many introductory sociology texts devote space to raising the issues of theoretical and methodological diversity, and encourage students to look at some of the metatheoretical issues that lie behind them.³ In this chapter, I explore the nature of the diversity of sociology in order to identify some of the associated problems. This discussion also provides a useful backdrop for my development, in later chapters, of a new metatheory of sociology.

1.2 The Patterns of Diversity

Despite the diversity within the discipline, sociology is far from chaotic, and can be analyzed in several ways, each of which illuminates one or more significant features of the discipline.

1.2.1 First, Second, and Third World Sociology

The first aspect of the diversity of sociology I shall discuss is its regional, national, and ethnocentric character. This feature of sociology is important because it indicates, at a gross level, the political and ideological influences on sociology.

In a global study of sociology, Gareau establishes that sociology has regional, national, and ethnocentric characteristics that go beyond the content of specific studies.⁴ The various contemporary sociological perspectives, or "sects" as he calls them, are assumed by Gareau to be legitimate sociology. While acknowledging that sociology everywhere is characterized by diversity, Gareau is particularly interested in whether the patterns of diversity are different in the first, second, and third worlds.

Gareau finds that, just as the first world is dominated economically by the United States, first world sociology is dominated by North American sociology. There are considerable differences between North America and Western Europe, with the former tracing its philosophic ancestry to the analytic tradition and the latter to the more overtly normative and qualitative European philosophies. Despite this, Gareau is able to demonstrate United States dominance of Western sociology. In the United States, sociology was dominated throughout the 1950s and 1960s by the structural functionalist perspective and by a quantitative approach to methodology.⁵ The influence of this perspective declined somewhat in the 1970s, but it is still influential.⁶ Western European sociology is more openly normative and less quantitative in its approach.

Second world sociology was dominated, at the time of the study, by the U.S.S.R., although China was a major exception. The dominant perspective in Soviet sociology, at least until the mid-1980s, was Marxist historical materialism. While there is a strong tendency in North American social science to see sociology as value-free, Soviet social science argues that norms are an essential part of sociology. Soviet sociology tends to be more historical and less quantitative than North American sociology.

The differences between North American and Soviet sociology extend beyond the nature of sociology in general to the nature of society and sociological explanations. The dominant North American sects adopt a consensus view of society and have a tendency to prefer individualistic explanations of social phenomena. The dominant Soviet bloc sects⁷ take a conflict perspective of society and prefer holistic explanations of social phenomena.⁸ Gareau maintains that the differences between the dominant sects in the first and second worlds are such that sociology may be regarded as discontinuous, in much the same way that Kuhn regards successive paradigms in science as discontinuous.

Although some sociological perspectives may not be as dissimilar as these extremes, Gareau has shown that sociology today is multi-paradigmatic. And having shown how these dominant sects support the respective political ideologies in the regions concerned,⁹ and are in turn supported by their respective ruling parties,¹⁰ Gareau sees this discontinuity as almost guaranteed by the political power of the antagonists. This, in addition to developments in third world sociology to be discussed a little later, form the crux of Gareau's argument that if to be scientific is to be uni-paradigmatic, sociology will not become scientific in the foreseeable future.¹¹

A major aspect of the discontinuity between first and second world sociology is that the dominant sects in each are supported by an ideology that serves to legitimize the sect as sociology. This is a further indication of the multi-paradigmatic nature of sociology, and illuminates the above distinction between sociology and the natural sciences. Sociology is legitimized at the sectarian (or perspective) level, whereas physics, for example, is legitimized at the disciplinary level.¹²

The ideologies of the dominant sects discussed so far work in much the same way as each other. They identify the sect concerned as a science (in Marxist formulations) or as a proto-science nearing maturity (in many non-Marxist formulations), often at the expense of competing sects, which may be deemed non-scientific or ideological.¹³

In a literature survey, Gareau identifies three myths related to the dominant sects: the Marxist myth (which excludes China), and the short and long forms of the non-Marxist myth. All three focus on methodological criteria as the basis for legitimacy. The Marxist myth legitimizes as science sociology based on the theory of historical materialism and the dialectic method.

The short form of the non-Marxist social science myth is rarely stated explicitly; more often it appears as an underlying assumption in books on the epistemology and methodology of the social sciences. The myth takes the form of acknowledging some progress in sociology (or, in some cases, the social sciences in general), locating it in the pre-scientific stage, and advising that further progress will be achieved if the methods of the natural sciences (particularly physics) are adopted. Thus, Reynolds identifies ambiguity in formulating statements and ignorance of the structure of scientific writing as the major impediments to sociology's attaining maturity.¹⁴ And Popper, pointing out the limits of the historicist method, whereby prediction is based on historical studies designed to reveal patterns and trends in history, recommends its rejection and the adoption of the methods of physics. Interestingly, as Gareau points out, Popper comes precariously close to historicism himself when discussing the effects of Galileo and Newton on physics and Pasteur on biology. Popper continues, "But the social sciences do not as yet seem to have found their Galileo."¹⁵ The implication is that they will, and that they will follow in the footsteps of physics and biology and reach maturity.¹⁶

The long form of the social science myth again assumes that each science develops through a pre-scientific stage. A precondition for the attainment of mature social science is a society characterized by rationalism, secularization, and respect for science in general. The transition to maturity, then, depends on two factors: the emergence of an autonomous field of study, and the application of the "scientific method."¹⁷ This form of the myth can be seen in the works of Durkheim and Weber, two of the great founders of sociology. Both aimed to establish sociology as a separate and autonomous discipline, and both were keen to develop a scientific method of studying society.

The adoption of these myths enables the dominant sects of the first and second worlds to legitimize their own work as scientific (or very nearly so) and to write off, without too much consideration, the views of opposing sects as unscientific. This is in fact what has happened. Gareau refers to Gurney's study on the treatment of Marxist sociology in the United States. The study was based on an analysis of mainstream American sociological journals and books during

the formative years of academic Marxism, from 1895 to 1920. Gurney's study found that on the whole, Marxism was ignored. But where references to the Marxist perspective were made, they were predominantly negative. Of the six major categories of criticism, the first was that Marxism was unscientific. The other categories were that Marxism is deterministic, and that it is wrong with respect to individualism, psychology, the class struggle, or private property.¹⁸ On the other hand, Kassof's study reveals that Soviet sociology has criticized the sociology of the United States for not recognizing the universal validity of Marxist-Leninism. It is thus seen as reactionary and scientifically sterile, as being incapable of formulating general theory, and as being bogged down in insignificant and non-cumulative empirical studies. Moreover, it sees the dominant sect as functional for capitalism, hiding the exploitative nature of the system from the North American population.¹⁹ Although far from being a comprehensive study of the various sociological perspectives, Gareau's study, then, makes it quite clear that sociology is characterized by at least two dominant and conflicting sects or paradigms.

In addition to showing that sociology in the first and second worlds is dominated by particular sects, Gareau argues that sociology is nationalist and ethnocentric in its focus. To support his argument, Gareau analyzed studies from two first world countries, the United States and France. The United States studies were designed to determine the great men (Gareau points out wryly that women are hardly ever found on these lists) in the discipline. The studies were based on the major journals and texts, and counted the numbers of citations of each person, excluding the classic sociologists such as Durkheim. Of the ten North American studies analyzed, eight found that North Americans comprised 100 percent of the modern scholars. In the other two studies, North American scholars comprised 95 percent and 95.7 percent. Gareau's argument is that unless sociology is seen as a nationalistic and ethnocentric enterprise, these results are disproportionate and hard to explain. To further support the contention that sociology is nationalistic, Gareau analyzes a series of seven French studies designed to show the best departments in the discipline for pursuing graduate studies. The studies asked French academics to nominate the universities, French or foreign, that they would recommend for doctoral studies, and were asked not to let location or residence influence their answers. French institutions were recommended overwhelmingly, capturing between 84.3 percent and 100 percent of the nominations. Although no comparable study has been done in the United States, a North American study did find that the most-cited authors were all at North American institutions.²⁰

None of this is too surprising if one acknowledges that sociology is for the most part interested in solving particular problems in particular societies, and that empirical studies are carried out in particular societies. But problems

do arise, if one fails (as Parsons, for example, does) to recognize the historical and cultural specificity of sociological theory.²¹

What is perhaps more surprising is the effect of nationality on truth-claims. In a study of the attitudes of social scientists to the Malvinas/Falklands War, Gareau surveyed political scientists and sociologists at the tri-annual conference of the International Political Science Association held in Rio de Janeiro in 1982, and at the quadri-annual World Congress of the International Sociological Association held in Mexico City in the same year. The respondents were mainly from the United States, Western Europe, and Latin America. Asia was poorly represented at the conferences, and Soviet bloc social scientists, with the exception of the Poles, refused to participate in the survey. Gareau hypothesized that the British and Argentine responses would represent extremes, that responses from United States and Western Europe would resemble the British responses, and that those from the rest of Latin America would resemble the Argentine response. The hypotheses were all confirmed.

Of greater interest than straightforward attitudes, though, were the conflicting truth-claims when respondents were asked to classify the war as either “colonial,” “cold war,” or “territorial”—83.3 percent of the Argentine respondents chose “colonial,” whereas only 9.5 percent of the British chose this response. Of the respondents from the rest of Latin America, 61.3 percent agreed with the Argentine response, compared with only 36.1 percent of those from the United States and 31.9 percent of those from Western Europe.²² Given the importance of such value-laden concepts to sociology, the implication is that the truth-claims of sociology are along nationalist lines, and are thus not verified or denied at a disciplinary level as are the truth claims of the natural sciences. This, as I pointed out in §1.1, is a problem for sociology.

Gareau continues his argument for the multi-paradigmatic nature of sociology by examining the major external influences on the development of sociology. He finds that the content and style of sociology are shaped by the discrete cultures and societies in which the discipline is found. Cultural differences in sociology often show up as national differences when a nation is dominated by one culture, but can be distinguished in studies of countries with two dominant cultures, such as Canada. Political factors, too, are a major influence on sociology. Governments and ruling elites may engage in censoring or prohibiting unwanted sects, as happened in the Soviet Union under Stalin, or may simply encourage favored approaches by influencing the institutional organization of social science and funding favored types of research, as happens in the United States and in Australia.

Economic factors (apart from direct government funding) are also influential in the first world. Gareau mentions that businesses, and in the United States, foundations, are involved in the production of sociological knowledge.

But the production of sociological knowledge anywhere requires journals, libraries, universities, and so on, in addition to researchers. Many third world countries are unwilling, and probably unable, to support the cost of social research. It is no accident that the great economic powers are the great social science powers.

The economic domination by the first and second worlds over the third world led Gareau to hypothesize that third world countries import sociology from the first world and second world, regardless (at least initially) of the cultural and historical specificity of sociology. A survey of studies of social scientific communications confirmed this. Incoming transactions to North American social science journals were overwhelmingly domestic in origin, and of those few that were not, all were from other first world countries, and the majority of these were from English-speaking countries. This contrasts sharply with incoming professional transactions in physics for the same country, where the majority of journals cited were foreign, and the majority of those were from the non-English-speaking first world. In physics, foreign, English-language journal citations ranked lower than citations from the second world, but in the social sciences, citations from the second world were virtually nonexistent. In the rest of the first world and most third world countries, incoming transactions in the social sciences are substantially North American.²³ Social science communications between the United States, the rest of the first world, and much of the third world, are characterized by unequal, vertical interactions. Gareau found indications that the same characteristics apply to the relations between the Soviet Union, the rest of the second world, and those parts of the third world under second world influence, but these indications were based on much thinner data than were available for the first world.

Third world sociology, then, is predominantly derivative from first and second world sociology. Social science communications in the third world are dominated by one-way flows from the United States, or perhaps the United States and the original colonial power. There is little return flow to the first world and little interaction among third world practitioners themselves, according to Gareau. However, this is changing. With the exception of China and other socialist countries, Roy has noted a trend among Asian social scientists towards indigenization, and a turning away from the dominant Western frameworks.²⁴ This development seems to have resulted in a deal of regional cooperation among Asian social scientists as they recognize the similarity of the problems they face. Gareau notes that Latin American sociology seems to be developing in a similar way. There is now a high level of regional interaction in Latin America, and Gareau sees the general framework of dependency theory as influential, and as being capable of providing an alternative paradigm to those of the dominant sects of the first and second worlds.

Gareau's global analysis of sociology not only establishes that sociology is multi-paradigmatic. His analysis of the trend in third world sociology also suggests the formation of a major new paradigm. If Kuhn's criterion for science is correct, sociology is far from approaching scientific status. It is instead becoming more diverse.

Gareau accepts Kuhn's definition of a mature science. But unlike Popper, he denies that sociology is waiting for its "Galileo." The global state of sociology is, according to Gareau, as good as can be expected. Sociology as a discipline produces much useful knowledge. But, Gareau argues, such knowledge is of a practical nature. Sociology can never aspire to scientific status. Rather, it is a craft, and a reasonably good one at that.

I shall not go into the distinctions that can be made between practical knowledge and theoretical knowledge. Gareau himself took this distinction for granted. But ultimately, as will become clear later in this book, such a distinction cannot be clear-cut. Nor, I believe, is it particularly useful in distinguishing scientific knowledge. However, I do agree with Gareau that much sociology is useful, and also with his characterization of sociology as multi-paradigmatic.

I disagree with his assumption that sociology as a discipline is as good as it can be. Sociology is diverse by nature, but, as I hope to show in chapters 6 and 7, sociology produces scientific knowledge as a result of its diversity, and the adoption of a consciously pluralistic methodology will improve sociology. And while it is diverse, sociology need not be multi-paradigmatic. Lack of communication between the various sects or perspectives can be overcome.

But Gareau's point that sociology today is multi-paradigmatic remains. I turn now to an analysis of the dominant sects or perspectives in the United States (which, recall, dominate first world sociology) to further illustrate the disparate nature of much sociology, and to identify more of the problems that this gives rise to.

1.2.2 Sociology in the United States of America

The multi-paradigmatic nature of contemporary sociology is apparent not only from the global pattern of diversity, but also from the patterns of diversity within the United States of America. C. Wright Mills's analysis of North American sociology, *The Sociological Imagination*, though dated, is still relevant. It has the advantage of bringing out some of the deeper conceptual and methodological problems associated with sociological sectarianism, so I use it as the basis of my discussion.²⁵

Sociology as a discipline, according to Mills, is distinguished by the nature of the problems it seeks to solve and the questions it seeks to answer. These questions fall into three main groups. The first set is to do with the structure of particular societies; with their components, and how they are related to one another; with how a particular society differs from other varieties of social order; and with the importance of particular features of the society for its stability and

for change. The second set of questions relates to the place of the society in human history; with the mechanics by which it changes; with how particular features affect and are affected by the historical period in which they move; and with the essential features of this period of history and how it differs from other periods. The third set of questions is concerned with the varieties of men and women that prevail in this society and this period; with what kinds of "human nature" are revealed in the conduct and character observed; and with the meaning for "human nature" of the features of society being examined. The skill that is required to answer these questions, to relate social structural issues to personal biography, is what Mills calls the "sociological imagination."²⁶ In the United States in the late 1950s, two dominant schools vied to be established as *the* way to do sociology. Mills named these schools the "grand theorists"²⁷ and the "abstracted empiricists," respectively. Both schools are open to criticism.

The "grand theorists." Mills illustrates the position of the grand theorists with references to that archetypal grand theorist, Talcott Parsons. Parsons's main concern is with the problem of social order, with how societies maintain their integrity over time. He conceives of societies as social systems with certain functional prerequisites. According to Parsons, any society, if it is to survive, must meet the physical needs of its members, which means it must have systems of production and distribution. There must be some sort of common agreement among its members about their priorities and aims, which means it must have the institutional means for identifying, selecting, and achieving these collective aims. Any society has to ensure that its members are sufficiently motivated to play the roles required of them and have the necessary commitment to the values of that society. Members must also have ways of managing any interpersonal conflicts that may develop. And any society has to ensure the integration of the various parts of the system.²⁸ Grand theorists, then, are operating at a high level of abstraction. Their primary concern is conceptual analysis rather than empirical study.

The focus of Mills's criticisms of the grand theorists in general, and Parsons in particular, is directed at the way universal validity is claimed for their model of society. The simplifying assumptions of grand theory are effectively given the status of universal laws. But if they are treated as universal laws, they are false. The existence in most Western societies, and recently in the East as well, of large and well-organized groups of people with values opposing those of the dominant groups shows that far from being a universal feature of all societies, the assumption that societies must have a basic value consensus is false. And by ignoring the concept of power, and the fact that one form of power is the power to manage ideas, Parsons's framework precludes him from even posing the important empirical questions of how and to what extent the major institutions of any particular society are legitimized.²⁹ In fact, the way the grand theorists portray the normative order leads to the assumption that virtually all

power is legitimized. To further illustrate this point, Mills quotes Parsons as saying that in the social system,

... the maintenance of the complementarity of role-expectations, once established, is not problematical. . . . No special mechanisms are required for the explanation of the maintenance of complementary interaction-orientation.³⁰

Within the framework of grand theory, the social system is seen as intrinsically stable and harmonious. The idea of conflict cannot be effectively formulated. Structural antagonisms, large-scale revolts, and revolutions cannot be considered. The idea of social change is unavailable to grand theorists and, according to Parsons, to sociology:

When such a theory is available, the millennium for social science will have arrived. This will not come in our time and most probably never.³¹

This is not to say that grand theorists never use the concepts of conflict and change, but rather

... that in so far as problems are dealt with realistically by grand theorists, they are dealt with in terms that find no place in grand theory, and are often contradictory to it.³²

The error of the grand theorists is that they see the problem of social order as being simply a theoretical one, whereas in fact the question of what holds any particular society together is contingent. Different social structures differ in the degree of unity they have, and in the way that unity is achieved. Mills illustrates this point with brief analyses of the principles of integration of classical liberal society and Nazi Germany. The principle of integration of classical liberal society is the free ascendancy, within each order of institutions (for example, the economy, kinship, the military), of the free initiative of individuals in competition with each other. In Nazi Germany, the principle of integration was the coordination of society by an often uneasy alliance of the political, economic, and military elites, whose power within their respective institutional order was highly concentrated.³³ And it is hard to believe that, prior to democracy, contemporary South African society had a value consensus, or that such consensus was the basis of its social order. The point is that there is no one answer to the problem of social order, and that in studying social order in any particular society, historical and cross-cultural analyses are essential. These examples show the inadequacy of grand theory in treating the problem of social order. Mills's lesson is that conceptual analysis, although essential to sociology, can-

not alone provide the answers to sociological problems. What ought to be a part of the sociological enterprise has become, in the hands of the grand theorists, the whole.³⁴

The "abstracted empiricists." Of abstracted empiricism, Mills remarks that, "Like grand theory, [it] seizes upon one juncture in the process of work and allows it to dominate the mind."³⁵ Abstracted empiricism is recognizable by the types of problems that are researched and the way they are studied. Advertising and media research, public opinion, and voting behavior are characteristic areas of study, and the preferred methods are the set interview and the survey. The data obtained from these are subjected to statistical analysis in search of significant relations among them. The thinness of the results obtained is the focus of Mills's criticism.

He points to the school's studies of political life, most of which are concerned with voting behavior, primarily, Mills suggests, because of its amenability to statistical analysis. Mills questions the value of full-scale studies of voting that make no reference to the party machinery for electioneering or indeed to any political institution at all. He refers to an accredited and celebrated study carried out in Ohio that found that rich, rural, and Protestant persons tended to vote Republican, and that people of opposite type tended to vote Democrat. But there is precious little in the study about the dynamics of North American politics. The idea of legitimation is one of the central problems of political science, particularly so because the problems of this discipline bear on questions of opinion and ideology.³⁶ But these issues, and the answers to questions about the depth of understanding of political issues by North Americans, cannot even be raised in the framework of abstracted empiricism, as we shall see.

Before I discuss the reasons for the poverty of this approach, I shall look at another example of the type of work done by the abstracted empiricists, this time in the area of social stratification. Among the most fruitful ways of typifying and understanding social strata and in turn the structural features of a society are the sociological concepts of caste, estate, and class. Of these, class, usually defined in economic terms, is the concept most applicable to modern western societies. The concepts of class developed by Marx, who analyzed class in terms of relationship to capital and the means of production, and by Weber, who analyzed class according to economic differences of market capacity that produce different life chances, have been extraordinarily fruitful. The abstracted empiricists have not imported the key notions from either of these theories, yet neither has a new theory of class arisen from this school. Rather, its practitioners have been content to use "quite spongy 'indices' of 'socio-economic status'"³⁷ to produce rankings, for example, of jobs. Such a series of rankings can give no idea of such social structural features as power, let alone any understanding of it.

Abstracted empiricism, then, is characterized not only by the sort of problems it tackles and the way it tackles them, but also by a lack of substantive

propositions and theories. A further characteristic of the school is the bureaucratic administrative apparatus it employs, and the type of workers it recruits—semi-skilled technicians rather than thinkers. Although critical of the latter, it is with the general lack of fruitfulness of the school that Mills is most concerned. Both can be traced to the main characteristics of the school—the positivist epistemology held by its practitioners, how they hold to it, and how they use it.

It is this [positivist] philosophy that underlies both the type of substantive research undertaken and its administrative and personnel apparatus. Both the substantive thinness of the actual studies and the felt need for the apparatus find their major intellectual justification in this particular philosophy of science.³⁸

A look at the major characteristics of positivism will show how adherence to it produces thin results. Positivism is a scientifically oriented form of empiricism first developed by the nineteenth-century French philosopher Auguste Comte. For the greater part of this century it was the dominant philosophy of science and it has been influential in sociology since the discipline first developed.³⁹ The natural sciences were regarded by the positivists as producing highly informative and certain knowledge of the world. The foundations of that certainty were sense experience and logic. Sensory experience was held to be incorrigible, and the logic of the scientific method truth-preserving. Beliefs about the world could be regarded as knowledge only if they could be put to the test of experience. The incorrigibility of observation combined with the logic of the scientific method to produce certain knowledge. Thus, the appropriate objects of scientific knowledge were phenomena and the general relations between phenomena.

The positivists regarded all phenomena as subject to invariable laws of nature. The task of science was to discover these laws, and scientific explanation consisted in showing the links between particular phenomena and these general laws of nature.⁴⁰ It was most definitely *not* the task of science to establish the underlying nature of phenomena, nor to search for generative/causal mechanisms. According to Comte, the search for these forms of knowledge belonged to the earlier “metaphysical” or pre-scientific stage in the development of knowledge. In the scientific or positivist stage, according to Comte,

... the human mind, recognizing the impossibility of attaining to absolute concepts, gives up the search for the origin and destiny of the universe and the inner causes of phenomena, and confines itself to the discovery, through reason and observation combined, of the actual laws that govern the succession and similarity of phenomena. The explanation of facts, now reduced to its real terms, consists in the establishment of a

link between various particular phenomena and a few general facts, which diminish in numbers with the progress of science.⁴¹

For the positivists, then, scientific knowledge was characterized by several features. The objects of scientific knowledge were phenomena; such knowledge took the form of general laws that must be testable by experience; and explanation consisted in showing the logical links between specific phenomena and these laws. These tenets formed a general methodology for the acquisition of scientific knowledge. Such knowledge was certain and value-free, and only knowledge acquired via these general methodological principles had any claim to the term. It is these methodological principles that underlie the positivists' claim of the "unity of science."⁴² The social sciences, then, were subject to the same broad methodological principles as the natural sciences. Insofar as they did not, or could not, comply, they were not producing knowledge at all.

The desire of the abstracted empiricists to be scientific and their belief that positivism provided *the* scientific method led them to follow its prescriptions in a way never seen in the natural sciences, even in physics, of which positivism was an attempted, if unsuccessful, model.⁴³ They allowed the "scientific method" to determine the sort of problems they took up and the ways in which they were formulated. To see how this happens, Mills turns to the work of Lazarsfeld, whom he regards as one of the more sophisticated exponents of abstracted empiricism.

Lazarsfeld regards sociology as a methodological speciality that stands between social philosophy and the mature social sciences (he mentions economics and demography as examples of the latter). The function of sociology is to turn the social analysis of the social philosopher (whom Lazarsfeld equates with the individual observer) into fully fledged social science.

Lazarsfeld identifies four steps in this process. "There is first the shift of emphasis from the history of institutions and ideas to the concrete behavior of people."⁴⁴ The point of this step seems to be to ensure that the data meet the positivist criterion of observability. In fact they do so only insofar as one believes in the veridicality of inner perception, for as Mills points out, the data are obtained from surveys and interviews, and the questions asked in these are put in terms of the psychological reactions of individuals.

The second step in the transition to a mature social science is, according to Lazarsfeld, "a tendency not to study one sector of human affairs alone but to relate it to other sectors."⁴⁵ Laudable if true, but Mills insists that it is not, except in the limited sense in which the meaning of "relate" is confined to statistical relations. Again this is consistent with the "scientific method," in which causal or generative relations in the world are held to be representable in some form of truth-preserving logic.

"There is third," Lazarsfeld continues, "a preference for studying social situations and problems which repeat themselves rather than those which occur

only once.”⁴⁶ Social structure is manifested in the regular patterns of social relations, but this is not, Mills points out, an attempt to introduce structural considerations, but rather a preference to study events (for example, elections) in which many people participate, and which recur and can thus be studied again.

This illustrates the way in which the positivist philosophy of science determines the sort of problem to be studied. For this version of positivism⁴⁷ uses induction as the logic of the scientific method. Induction cannot guarantee certainty. There is always a chance that one’s next observation will falsify the generalization. But naive inductivists believe that generalization from a finite number of singular observation statements is legitimate, provided that certain conditions are satisfied. These conditions are: first, the number of observation statements forming the basis of the generalization must be large; second, the observation must be repeated under a wide variety of conditions; and third, no accepted observation statement should conflict with the universal law or generalization derived.⁴⁸ Lazarsfeld’s third step for the transformation of social philosophy to a fully fledged social science can be seen as an attempt to ensure the first condition for legitimate induction.

The fourth step in the transition relates to the type of data required if sociology is to be a science. There will be “a greater emphasis on contemporary rather than on historical social events . . .,” and “. . . the sociologist will therefore have a tendency to deal mainly with contemporaneous events for which he is likely to get the kind of data he needs.”⁴⁹ Lazarsfeld’s prescriptions for sociology illustrate the way that the abstracted empiricist school allows the “scientific method” rather than the substantive problems of social science to be the orienting point for sociological work.⁵⁰

The abstracted empiricists themselves have offered different explanations for the thinness of their results, the most convincing of which is that sociology, as practised by the abstracted empiricists, is a relatively new science, so many more studies are required before they can be added together to give a picture of the social structure. But as Mills points out, it is arguable that any number of studies could be added together without giving a picture of social structure, for the data collected by the abstracted empiricist school is in terms of individual attributes. No amount of data in terms of individual attributes or motivations can add up to a social structural view of society. People are often unaware of the structural features of society, and even if they are aware of them, their responses to the sorts of questions asked are unlikely to show such awareness.

These points are perhaps best illustrated by considering a study that I frequently run with my students, the aim of which is to give information about the structure of Australian society. The initial hypothesis is that there is gender inequality in Australian society. “Inequality” can be defined as unequal access to power and resources. To investigate “gender inequality” means to investigate whether inequality in a society is non-random, divided along gender lines, and

due not to the biological characteristics of the sexes but rather to socially determined characteristics.

A simple, but not entirely trivial, example of how gender inequality might be instantiated is in the driving of motor cars. The driver of a car is in a position of power vis-a-vis any passengers. And both women and men in Australia drive well. In fact, on certain indices, for example, numbers of dangerous driving convictions and numbers of accidents, women seem to do rather better than men. A simple test of gender inequality in driving would be to establish whether significantly more men or women drive when adults of both sexes are present in a motor car.

Taking for granted the sampling issues that must be addressed in any statistical work of this kind, the test is simply a head-counting exercise. The results indicate that overall, in something approaching 85 percent of cars carrying adults of both sexes, a male is driving. Interestingly, between 10 p.m. and 1 a.m., these figures are reversed. This is a clear indication of power inequality along gender lines.

Now imagine the study is taken a little further. The relevant cars are pulled over and the occupants asked why that particular person is driving the car. The replies are varied. "It's my car." "Jessie gets nervous in traffic." "Bill is better at long distances." "It's her turn—we split the driving." "I know the way." And after 10 p.m.—"I always drive if we've been drinking," and "Bob's over the limit."

Note that none of the respondents' replies will be in terms of the social structure. They will be in terms of their personal motivations and their immediate milieu. The interesting question then becomes, what is the relationship between the social structural situation and individual motives and milieus. Do more men than women own cars? Why? Why is ownership linked with the right to drive (control)? Are women more nervous in traffic? Why? Or why are they said to be? Or are they just nervous with men? Do men drink more than women? Why? The list of questions is endless, and many of them end up in the territory of gender socialization and the social construction of masculinity and femininity, and thence back to the social structural situation in Australian society.

By considering this example, Mills's criticisms of abstracted empiricism can be made clearer. Theories of social structure are the starting point of the exercise. The study could not have been formulated without the concepts of social structure, power, and gender. These concepts guide the sort of data collected. One cannot simply gather data at random and hope that given enough of it, a picture of social structure will emerge. And one would never get a picture of social structure from the interview responses. The responses are in terms of individual characteristics, and the adding up of individual characteristics does not amount to a description of social structure. What Mills is saying of abstracted empiricism is that it provides no framework for the selection of research problems, putting it outside the framework of science. He is also saying

that work within that school can never arrive at a social structural picture of society. But in good sociology, the selection of the milieu to be studied ought to be made in accordance with the problems of structural significance in society. And there should be a continuing two-way interaction between theory and empirical work. Although the specific methods used by abstracted empiricists, as distinct from their philosophy, are clearly suitable for the investigation of many problems (see the example above), the methodology of abstracted empiricism, besides being inoperable as method, eliminates the great social problems and issues of our time from inquiry.⁵¹

The appeal of abstracted empiricism, according to Mills, lies in its quest for certainty. Granted that certainty is unattainable, it remains to ask what level of verification is appropriate. If social scientists are too exacting in their demands, they will get nothing but a welter of very detailed exposition. If they are too unexacting they will end up with some very grand theories divorced from reality. Mills notes that the work of abstracted empiricism is often regarded as true but trivial, but he questions even its truth. It may be precise, but precision is not to be confused with truth. If one has been involved in the coding and processing of thousands of interviews, one sees just how malleable the realm of "fact" may be.⁵² Precision, according to Mills, should not be the sole determinant of method.

We should be as accurate as we are able to be in our work upon the problems that concern us. But no method, as such, should be used to delimit the problems we take up, if for no other reason than that the most interesting and difficult issues of *method* usually begin where established techniques do not apply.⁵³

Mills's picture of American sociology is a picture of two dominant schools, the grand theorists and the abstracted empiricists. Both schools have major shortcomings. The abstracted empiricists are bound by a restrictive epistemology and cannot get beyond the collection and statistical sorting of data. The grand theorists have become stuck at a very high level of generalization and cannot get down to facts.

Both of these tendencies or schools exist and flourish within what ought to be pauses in the working process of social science. But in them what ought to be a little pause has become, if I may put it so, the entrance into fruitlessness.⁵⁴

In philosophic terms, Mills can be seen as criticizing, from a realist point of view, the grand theorists and the abstracted empiricists for their rationalism and empiricism respectively. Realism is the thesis that there is a real world ex-

isting independently of our attempts to know it; that we as humans can have knowledge of that world; and that the validity of our knowledge-claims is, at least in part, determined by the way the world is. Our knowledge of the world is not obtained simply from perceptions and a content-free logic, as the empiricists would have it; neither are its sources purely cognitive, as the rationalists would have it. Rather, such knowledge has both cognitive and empirical content.

Neither of these schools, then, is likely to produce good sociology. Neither is likely to add to the work of the classical theorists such as Marx, Weber, or Durkheim. For neither has what Mills regards as essential to good sociology, the "sociological imagination." There were always, even in the postwar America of which Mills was writing, good sociologists in what Mills calls the "classical tradition." Mills's point was they were not members of the dominant schools, and were consequently less influential.

The situation has changed since Mills's analysis, with, among other things, the fall from grace of the grand theorists (or structural functionalists), which leaves positivist social science dominant;⁵⁵ the rise of symbolic interactionism as a perspective; developments such as labelling theory in studies of deviance; the impact of feminism on sociology; and, most recently, the increasing dominance of postmodernist and poststructuralist perspectives.⁵⁶ So although these schools are both still influential, North American sociology, like world sociology, is becoming increasingly diverse. This returns us to the major theme of the chapter, the diversity of sociology.

1.2.3 Sociological Perspectives

Gareau's analysis of the diversity of sociology was a sociological analysis of the external⁵⁷ features maintaining the major divisions between sociological sects. Mills's analysis highlighted an internal dispute at the epistemological level between rationalism, empiricism, and realism. Another way of analyzing the diversity of sociology, popular in Britain but also apparent in Western Europe, the United States, and Australia, is according to the various assumptions about society used as starting points by various schools. This, too, is an internal analysis, but focussed at the level of methodology rather than epistemology. By looking at such methodological features as the assumptions made about the nature of society, the sorts of questions asked, the sorts of concepts used, and the sorts of answers or solutions or explanations that are given, one can roughly divide sociology into a number of perspectives.⁵⁸

The divisions are rough in this sense: that although the perspectives identified by various analysts are all readily recognizable by sociologists, different analysts may identify different numbers of perspectives, depending on how broad they make the identifying assumptions about the nature of society, and on how important they regard a particular perspective for the purposes of their discussion. For example, some include Marxism in the conflict perspective,

some treat it separately as a special case, and some simply identify the two or discuss Marxism at the expense of other conflict perspectives.⁵⁹

Sociologists themselves may work entirely within one perspective, but they may also work with several, so the use of particular sociologists to illustrate one perspective or another should not be taken as an indication that they are confined to that perspective. Each perspective has its favored research methods, which is not surprising, as methods are a function of the problems being investigated.⁶⁰ But no perspective has exclusive rights over any method, and neither are perspectives confined to a single method.

The first distinction I should like to draw is between structuralist and agency (or action) approaches to society. The structuralist approach to society assumes that one's social environment—the way society is organized and structured—influences to a large extent, or even determines, one's values, attitudes, beliefs, and actions. It looks to the social structure of society to explain individual characteristics and actions. The agency approach assumes that society is simply the aggregate of individual social actions, and looks to the nature of those actions for an explanation of social structure.⁶¹

In this section, I will discuss the bases of each of these approaches, taking the structuralist perspective first, and illustrate the perspectives with examples from sociological studies. This will provide a glimpse of the diversity of sociology at the theoretical and methodological levels, besides providing a framework for the development of a naturalist realist metatheory of sociology.

The Structuralist Perspective

Within the structuralist perspective, a further distinction can be made between the consensus and conflict perspectives. Underlying the consensus perspective⁶² is the assumption that societies are relatively stable and harmonious, and the major questions center on how that stability is maintained. Implicitly or explicitly an analogy is made between society and a living organism or society and a homeostatic system. Just as the different parts of an organism function to keep the whole intact and working, it is assumed that the various institutions and/or various features of society play a role in maintaining its stability.

The consensus perspective: Durkheim. Emile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology as a discipline, made a major contribution to the consensus perspective. His structuralist approach can be clearly illustrated in his definition of social phenomena, which he distinguishes from both physical and psychological phenomena. He recognized that there was

... a category of facts which present very special characteristics: they consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the indi-

vidual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him. Consequently, since they consist of representations and actions, they cannot be confused with organic phenomena, nor with psychological phenomena, which have no existence save in and through the individual consciousness.⁶³

Although the individual plays a part in their creation, several individuals at least must have interacted in order to give rise to new norms or to modify existing ones. These norms are crystallized, or institute themselves, outside the individual.

Social facts, though they are representations,⁶⁴ are not reducible to individual representations. They can be explained only in terms of other social facts. Against those who see individual consciousness as the only substratum of society, Durkheim points out that although society has no other active components than individual humans, there are integrating elements as well.⁶⁵ Durkheim's argument here is that the properties of a whole cannot be explained in terms of the properties of the individual parts.

. . . what is so readily deemed unacceptable for social facts is freely admitted for other domains of nature. Whenever elements of any kind combine, by virtue of this combination they give rise to new phenomena. One is therefore forced to conceive of these phenomena as residing, not in the elements, but in the entity formed by the union of these elements.⁶⁶

Durkheim, then, does not believe that social facts can be explained in terms of individual actions or representations. He argues that just as the living cell contains nothing but chemicals, so society contains nothing but individuals. But the characteristic phenomena of life do not reside in the atoms of hydrogen, oxygen, carbon, and nitrogen. Life cannot be split up in this way, but can be located only in the living substance in its entirety.⁶⁷

As society is a set of institutionalized norms *external* to the individual and exercising constraint on the individual, the appropriate level of explanation for these social norms is to be found not in the individual but in other social phenomena. The individual is simply the means by which particular social phenomena are instantiated, not the focus of social explanation.

Durkheim, then, views society as a whole, or systemically, and as we might expect, stresses the importance of functional explanation in the process of scientific investigation. A functional analysis of a society may show what features of that society are required if it is to maintain its specific characteristics, and may point to what features may have to be changed if the society is to take a new direction.

Unlike Comte, Durkheim does not see functional analyses as automatically teleological. "We use the word 'function' in preference to 'end' or 'goal'

precisely because social phenomena generally do not exist for the usefulness of the results they produce."⁶⁸ And unlike many later functionalists (for example, Parsons), Durkheim does not make the mistake of attributing a function to every social phenomenon. Just as in biology, where a normal feature of a creature, as a result of historic accident, may exist without serving any function, so the same can happen in society.⁶⁹

Functionalists have often been criticized for assuming that the attribution of a function for society to a social institution or feature of society is sufficient for its explanation. Durkheim, despite his use of functional analyses, escapes this criticism. He believes that to intervene in nature, knowledge of the functions of social phenomena is not enough. One has to know how those particular phenomena arose, and how they can be manipulated. Durkheim insists that if sociology is to be of practical use, causal explanations are essential,⁷⁰ and he sees functional explanation and causal explanation as dual avenues of research. ". . . [W]hen one undertakes to explain a social phenomenon the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfils must be investigated separately."⁷¹ The distinction between causal explanations and functional explanations turns out to be crucial to sociology, and will be taken up in depth in chapter 5.

Talcott Parsons played a leading part in the development of the consensus perspective, but the flavor of his approach came out in the discussions in §1.2.2. above. Instead, I shall discuss briefly Kai Erikson's approach to deviance, which starts from the consensus or functionalist approach.⁷²

The consensus perspective: Erikson. If one assumes that societies are entities in their own right, that they can be distinguished from other societies, then they must have some sort of boundary, some way of distinguishing members of a particular society from outsiders. When one considers the variety of societies or social groups that exist, not all of which are mutually exclusive, it becomes apparent that the boundaries of a society are normative rather than physical. A question that arises with respect to the stability of a society is how those normative boundaries are maintained and how they are changed, so that members of a society are aware of what they must do and what they cannot do in order to remain fully fledged members. A little reflection shows that norms retain their validity only if they are regularly used as a basis of judgment. Each time the community censures some act of deviance, then it can be expected that the authority of the violated norm is sharpened, re-establishing the boundaries of the group.

It is from within this framework that Erikson studied the Antinomian controversy of 1636. In Puritan New England before the 1630s, the church preached that grace was a condition bestowed upon chosen people by God, and that nothing that happened on earth could change one's state of grace. This was in contrast to the established church in Europe, which declared that grace could be obtained by prayer and good works.